The Swan of the Mikhailovsky Theatre

Angelina Vorontsova

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For Europe, Russian ballet is represented by Svetlana Zakharova, Olga Smirnova and Evgenia Obraztsova. But this overlooks the fact that the purest Russian classical style is embodied by another ballerina: Angelina Vorontsova. She can be seen in Saint Petersburg, not at the Mariinsky, but a little closer to the Hermitage, at the Mikhailovsky Theatre. During the festive season, synonymous for prima ballerinas with a succession of performances, we asked her to talk about her artistic work and her relationship with classicism and modernity. The result was a sober and subtle dialogue about her creative process and aesthetic preferences. The message has universal value in this new year: whether in Russia or elsewhere, art must always come first.

Angelina Vorontsova was born in 1991 in the city of Voronezh, south of Moscow. After a stint in artistic gymnastics, she chose ballet at the age of eleven and trained first in her hometown, then at the renowned Moscow Academy of Choreography. Upon completing her studies in 2009, she was considered one of the great hopes of Russian dance and immediately joined the Bolshoi troupe, where she danced until 2013. At that point, she decided to move to Saint Petersburg to become Prima Ballerina at the Mikhailovsky Theatre. Experts praise her mastery of the classical repertoire, with her performances in *La Bayadère*, *Swan Lake* and *Don Quixote* each time being major events on the banks of the Neva. A dancer much appreciated for her talent and character, she received important distinctions. In 2021, a grand gala evening was organised in her honour at the Mikhailovsky Theatre, where she danced on her thirtieth birthday alongside other great names in Russian ballet.

Refined Style

Angelina Vorontsova, it is a great pleasure for our English-speaking readers to get to know you better.

I would like to start by asking you about your preference in terms of dance style. At the Mikhailovsky, your repertoire is very classical, which you claim. In your opinion, what do these established works have that more contemporary creations do not?

I have always been interested in all styles of dance. I try to dance as much as possible, not only the classical repertoire, but also the contemporary repertoire. I have danced ballets by Jiří Kylián, Nacho Duato and Roland Petit. I also don't rule out participating in other performances by contemporary choreographers.

However, ballet is currently going through a period where audiences want to see a story on stage. That is why, alongside contemporary creations, the classical ballet has become very

relevant, and even choreographers who had never been interested in the classical repertoire before are now interpreting performances in a new way. This is particularly true of Nacho Duato at the Mikhailovsky Theatre, who is 'refreshing' classical productions. These performances include not only classical dances, but also his personal style.

For me, even though I always try to enrich my repertoire, it is classical ballet that has the perfect structure. A ballerina can only dance it when she is in peak physical condition, with a lot of strength and energy. Contemporary ballet, on the other hand, can be danced at a more mature age. This is also why I am currently focusing on classical ballet, as it requires a lot of physical resources. It is possible that contemporary ballet will play a more important role in my life in the second half of my career.

Your dance style is very academic, but it remains personal, with what I perceive to be a purity that is unique to you. How would you define it in your own words?

I am always delighted to hear that my dancing has a particular style. I think this is due to an innate plasticity, which my teachers and I have worked on extensively. What is more, all my teachers were genuine Russian dancers, with a style combining expressiveness, beautiful lines, technique and precision. The combination of all these qualities is the very essence of Russian ballet. That is why I essentially define myself as a Russian ballerina, striving to incorporate only the best into my work. My style is simply a reflection of true Russian ballet.

In ballet, great importance is attached to precision, classicism and perfect preparation. Only once the ballerina has mastered all this can she allow herself to give in to sensuality and emotion. But, of course, Russian ballet without emotion is not Russian ballet. I think this is a fundamental element that has enabled it to conquer the world. We must not forget this under any circumstances. We must work not only on classicism and the purity of movement, but also on emotion. We must ensure that each character is distinguished by their content and their role. It should not simply be Angelina Vorontsova who enters the stage, but Nikyia, Giselle, Odette, Odile, so that all these roles are different.

As you mentioned, Nacho Duato, your artistic director at the Mikhailovsky, is known for his adaptations with personal touches, such as *La Bayadère*[1]. What does he bring to the original works, in your opinion? How does he renew them?

When I received the offer from the Mikhailovsky Theatre, one of the main reasons I accepted was to be able to work with Nacho Duato. I love his contemporary choreography. I dance in his *White Darkness*, *Without Words*, *Duende* — all of these performances have already become essential works in contemporary dance.

But as Russian audiences really appreciate classical ballets, the Mikhailovsky Theatre's management suggested that Nacho Duato create his own versions. And what is particularly valuable to me is that I am the first performer in all of his adaptations and that Nacho has staged them for me — *La Bayadère*, *Swan Lake*, the new Don Quixote, *Hidalgo of La Mancha*.

This contact between the ballerina and the director is one of the most essential parameters in creation. You don't just perform a choreography created many years ago, you participate in the creation of the ballet's history. With Nacho, we have established a very close creative contact.

As a choreographer, he treats the classical heritage with great care. He preserves all the best moments from well-known ballets. For example, the white adage from *Swan Lake*, the black pas de deux of Odile and Prince Siegfried, or the scene from the Kingdom of the Shades in the ballet

[1] *La Bayadère,* choreographed by Nacho Duato, with Angelina Vorontsova in the title role, Bel Air Classique, DVD, 2020.

La Bayadère. These are the pinnacles of classical ballet that cannot be staged any better. However, Nacho changes everything else in the choreography. He has sensed the spirit of the times, which demands that performances be concise and the action fast-paced. In collaboration with his assistants, the artist Angelina Atlagić and the lighting designer, he has created magnificent revisions of these performances. Dancing in his ballets is therefore a real pleasure.

Currently, his productions of *Sleeping Beauty* and *The Nutcracker* are running. These are also original choreographies by Nacho. And the St Petersburg audience, despite its traditionalism and scepticism in some respects, has greatly appreciated his ballets. There are more than ten of them, many of which are already being performed on the stage of our theatre.

In parallel with these performances in Saint Petersburg, during a grand evening in Moscow last year, you danced *The Firebird* in Moscow, a first for you. Although Fokine's ballet, originally performed by Tamara Karsavina, has also become a classic, it is marked by a style that is both more modern and more primitive. Does such a role pose any particular problems for you in terms of adaptation?

Taking part in *The Firebird* means touching on history, because Serge Diaghilev's Russian Seasons had an immense influence on art in general. It is not just about ballet, but also painting, fashion and theatre. Mikhail Fokine was one of the first Russian choreographers to begin changing Marius Petipa's strict canons. That is why this role was very important to me.

I immediately felt that this role was mine, largely because I worked on it with Andris Liepa. He literally passed this role on to me with his own hands. So I had no difficulty adapting, I simply enjoyed the fact that another 'bird' had been added to my repertoire: in addition to Odette and Odile, I now dance the Firebird.

These great classics are all very popular with Russian audiences. But do you still see an evolution in the art of ballet in Russia in recent years? Have the tastes of choreographers and audiences changed?

In recent years, the art of ballet in Russia has begun to develop very rapidly. Theatres have given very young choreographers a chance. Not all of the performances may be revelations, but this process is very significant for Russian ballet theatre.

We all know the great Russian and Soviet ballet masters, but the ballet masters of the new wave are not yet as well known. We are currently in a period where new choreographers are coming to the fore. I hope that in a few years' time, they will have consolidated their style and creativity and will be creating masterpieces for the Russian repertoire.

Angelina Vorontsova, to what extent are you inspired by other arts – music, of course, but also literature and painting? Are your tastes in these areas in line with your aesthetic preferences in ballet?

As an artist, I find great inspiration in constantly enriching my knowledge of new cultures, museums, countries and cities. I try to incorporate all of this into my work. I am, of course, very inspired by classical music, particularly the works of Russian and French composers, but also by sculpture and architecture.

In this respect, Italian Renaissance sculptures make a very strong impression on me. Last summer, I was in Florence. When you look at Michelangelo's David in reality, it has a completely different effect than a copy: a perfect body and its perfect representation. You realise how much the Italian Renaissance was a period that conveyed both inner and outer beauty, just like the art of ancient Greece. And you understand how close this artistic approach is to ballet.

While outer beauty is immediately visible on stage, inner beauty is also revealed; it is impossible to hide anything from the audience. The stage, as we say, is like litmus paper: it 'lays everything bare'. Therefore, the artists must be like a full vase. With each movement, they convey a thought, a message to the audience, filling them with beauty and emotion, so that the audience leaves with the feeling of having experienced something splendid that touches their soul.

How, then, will you continue to surprise audiences in the future? Specifically, what other roles would you also like to add to your repertoire?

The premiere of the ballet *Raymonda*, choreographed by Nacho Duato, is coming up soon. For me, the main event of this season is the performance of the title role in this ballet. I have a

feeling it will be one of his best shows. Nacho sees and feels it in a particular way, and this time it will be very different from the classical version.

I also dream of dancing as many of Roland Petit's choreographies as possible. For the moment, my repertoire only includes the role of Esmeralda in the ballet *Notre-Dame de Paris*. He is a great French choreographer who has had a significant influence on ballet around the world. One day, I would love to dance his *Carmen* – for me, it is a perfect performance. On that note, I really enjoyed working with Luigi Bonino, Roland Petit's partner and heir. He beautifully captures the nuances of his choreography.

Finally, I would definitely like to dance something radically contemporary. I hope that my creative life will give me the opportunity to do so.

One last question, Angelina Vorontsova, about the more distant future. You are a ballerina in full command of your art, but are you already thinking about what comes next, what you could accomplish after such a career?

First of all, I would like to continue to develop in the creative process and dance in many more performances. But I was taught from childhood that you shouldn't wait to enter a profession. That is why I have already trained as a dance teacher. At some point, I felt that I wanted to pass on my knowledge to future generations and that I might have the ability to do so.

As I just said, Russian ballet has undergone changes in recent decades. Contemporary choreography has emerged, and the classical Russian style is taught a little less. Since my teachers, who had a solid classical training, passed on their knowledge to me in my youth, I am now in a way responsible for passing it on to new generations. Even though I am not making any plans for the future at the moment – I dance, I enjoy my creativity and I dream of future performances – I see myself as a teacher in the future. It is a wonderful profession in which I can continue to flourish.